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A Short History of the 9th Illinois Volunteer Infantry

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A Short History of the 9th Illinois Volunteer Infantry:

How the 9th Saved the Union at Shiloh, at an Extraordinary Price

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In 1861 brave men of the Ninth Illinois Volunteer Infantry were mustered from St. Clair, Madison and Montgomery Counties in Illinois, and divided into ten individual companies of fighting men. Many of the men making up the volunteers for the Ninth were German and Eastern European immigrants who had come to Illinois in the early part of the nineteenth century and settled in Illinois. The Ninth fought fiercely in the Western Theater of war in the beginning of the American Civil War, on the clay-filled soil of Georgia under General William Tecumseh Sherman; the Ninth Illinois fought at places like the Battle of Fort Donelson and the Battle of Corinth, and most important of all, the Battle of Shiloh in the warm spring of 1862. The Ninth Illinois Infantry may have saved the Union Army from disaster at Shiloh, defending the farthest eastern flank that was guarding Pittsburg Landing, and in the process "showing a loss of killed and wounded unparalleled by the history of any regiment during the war" (Tortorelli).

During the spring of 1862, the schism of North and South over the prospects of slavery and state's rights were lodged into the hearts and minds of citizens North and South. War: this was the fear of many but the hope of some. To President Lincoln, war with the South was a last-resort option that stood miles behind the idea of peaceful negotiation and politics, but these notions were short-lived as the nation's "baptism by fire" found its genesis in April 1861 off the coast of South Carolina, the first state to secede from the Union. Confederate gunners fired from the South Carolina coast at Fort Sumter to thwart Union ships brought in to resupply the Union troops garrisoned there. Thus, the American Civil War had found its beginning. The North and the South uniformly called for thousands of volunteers for the war effort. President Lincoln called for 75,000 troops to

enlist for a three-month period to put down the rebellion, and this included the German immigrants from rural Illinois, who would go on to form the Illinois Ninth Volunteer Regiment (Cozzens, 33).

The Regiment of Ninth Illinois Volunteers was formed on April 25, 1861, in Springfield, eleven days after the fall of Fort Sumter, in response to Southern military aggression (Morrison, 7). Many of the men gathered around a man named August Mersy and called for him to become their commanding officer. Many of the regiment's leaders, however, detested the idea of Mersy because he had spent almost the entirety of his life around German-speaking people and "wrote English very imperfectly" (Hess, 128). After some debate of who the Ninth's commanding officer would be, Eleazar A. Paine was promoted to the rank of colonel and took command of the unit just before they set out from Springfield. Although Mersy had lost the position of colonel to Paine, he soon took on the role of lieutenant colonel, second in command of the unit. When the Ninth set out from Springfield in 1861, nervous and full of hope, the regiment "contained three Germans for every American" (Hess, 129).

After being mustered and drilled, the Ninth wasted no time moving South toward the action of the war. It was said that "the Rebels were evidently making their arrangements to take possession of, and occupy Cairo, IL," so the Ninth marched to the southernmost part of Illinois and made camp outside of Cairo to guard the city (Morrison, 8). Cairo was a vital junction to North and South because it is where the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers meet, both acting as major shipping routes and lines of communication between several states. The Ninth arrived in Cairo on the morning of May 1 and set up

camp to keep a close guard over the critical military and commercial choke point. When the soldiers arrived, numerous men were poorly supplied; for example, “many of them had no change of clothing for the three months they were in the service,” meaning the only clothes they had to wear would have been their uniforms (Morrison, 9). Other problems plagued their small camp, like sporadic re-supply issues that caused camp life to become chronically uncomfortable, some soldiers even went so far as to call camp life in Cairo “the hardest part of their military life” (Morrison, 10).

As the Ninth Regiment remained in Cairo awaiting a Confederate attack on the river junction that would not come, the men’s three-month volunteer contracts soon came to an end. Knowing this, some of the higher-ups in the unit like Colonel Paine and Lieutenant Colonel Mersy began persuading many of the men to reenlist and sign three-year army contracts, which many ended up doing (Cozzens, 34). This shuffling of ranks also caused problems between the soldiers with differentiating nationalities, specifically the Germans and the Americans. Paine took an anti-German stance when dealing with many of the men from the company and consistently “tried to be decisive against some of the Germans” (Hess, 130). This outraged Lieutenant Colonel Mersy, who saw Paine as too much of a political person who cared only about his military rank rather than his men, and labelled him as “anti-German” (Cozzens, 34). Several small scuffles within the higher ranks drove morale lower than it had been before. All of this was soon halted with the promotion of Paine to brigadier general, and Mersy took command of the regiment and immediately prepared his soldiers for field combat, and to head South into the mouth of the Confederacy.

In September 1861 the Ninth left Cairo and commenced a brisk march south under the command of General Ulysses S. Grant. Their goal was to reach the town of Paducah, Kentucky, before any Southern troops could occupy the town (Morrison, 13). The Ninth and Twelfth Illinois would set up fortifications and camp in Paducah for the winter and drill incessantly due to a lull in combat. During this time Mersy trained his troops rigorously and formed them into well-disciplined soldiers, taking a careful and methodical approach to ready his men for combat that would surely arise in the new year of 1862.

This combat, the first real action for the Ninth in the war, showed its ghastly face in the form of the Battle of Fort Donelson on the Tennessee River in February of 1862. Under the lead of Mersy, and ultimately under Grant, five companies of men from the Ninth Illinois followed up the Tennessee River and joined Grant's forces for a siege on Fort Donelson. Small attacks along the lines developed, yet no significant attacks came for some time. On February 15, however, the Confederates took the Federal troops by surprise by launching an assault on the Union lines (Hess, 132). The Ninth Illinois stood their ground, trying to repel the repeated Confederate attacks on their lines. Intense, breakneck, and bitterly violent combat ensued for two and a half hours straight, with recurrent Confederate attacks especially coming on the right flank of Mersy's lines, which took much of the blow during the confrontation. After hours of vicious warfare, the Ninth Illinois pulled back and was relieved due to lack of ammunition. The Ninth fought with obstinacy and a savage manner, and they paid a tremendous price for their bravery: "Of six hundred men engaged, thirty-six were killed, 165 were wounded, and nine were reported missing" (Cozzens, 34). In those crucial two and a half hours, they had held the Confederates back long enough to

let reinforcements from Grant's army regroup and regain control of the delicate situation (Hess, 132).

After the battle of Fort Donelson, men in the Ninth and also the Union Army had assumed that they had broken the back of the Confederacy with control of much of the Tennessee River; as well, "the rebel Governor and Legislature fled from Nashville in terror, taking with them whatever they could of State property" (Morrison, 26). Soldiers and citizens alike rejoiced over the Union triumph in the Tennessee region and expected peace within a short time, but this was not to be. One soldier from the Ninth compared the conflict's longevity to that of a serpent, exclaiming, "It is said a snake's tail does not die until sunset, even though its back may be Broken and its head mashed" (Morrison, 26). These dark thoughts about a war with no end in sight had no major effect on the soldiers of the Ninth, though, because morale was high among the fighting men. They were one of the first regiments to enter into Fort Donelson after the unconditional surrender of all Confederate troops. With Confederate troops on the run toward and out of Nashville, spirits were high among Union troops and high command alike, as they readied to delve deeper into their baptism of fire, and venture further into the heart of the Confederacy.

After the Battle of Fort Donelson, much of the Union Army that was stationed there set up camp and waited for orders from General Grant. Orders to move out came on March 6, 1862, and the Ninth Illinois boarded two steamboats, the "Lady Pike" and the "Commercial," and headed down the Cumberland River toward a rendezvous point at Savannah, Tennessee, and Pittsburg Landing (Morrison, 29). In all, Grant's Army of Tennessee was about 60,000 strong, a hugely terrifying force to any outfit that dared get in

its way. It took 95 steamboats to move much of the Army of Tennessee down the Cumberland River toward the muster point at Pittsburg Landing (Morrison, 29). In six days, the Ninth landed in Savannah, on May 12, and remained there for some time until they received orders to move out inland. Unknown to Grant or the Union high command, Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston and PGT Beauregard had a newly reorganized and strengthened Army of Mississippi, and had set up camp with a force of about 50,000 men in Corinth, Mississippi (War of the Rebellion). The Confederates were planning a surprise attack onto the Union lines that were concentrated near the Tennessee River, where they had recently landed.

On March 19, after some period of waiting, the Ninth headed inland to make camp near a crossroads called the Hamburg-Savannah Road (Cozzens, 36). Much of the Union Army immediately encountered some problems as they settled down inland, although at the time they did not realize it. Most of the Union Army made no effort whatsoever to barricade themselves within earthworks or build defensive positions because no attack was expected from Johnston's forces, who were still in Mississippi, more than twenty miles away from Union campsites. Lack of preparedness put Grant's Army at considerable risk for attack from the Confederates, which would eventually come on the morning of Sunday, April 6, 1862.

"Strange that a Sunday should have been chosen to disturb the holy calm of those woods," one young soldier mused (Woodhead). Union soldiers awoke on a cool, crisp spring day to "The Fragrance of apple blossoms," but also to sounds of an intense and gruesome assault on the center of the Union lines onto specifically General Prentiss's

division. Many men of the Ninth had not even fully awakened yet or eaten any breakfast. They quickly, frantically gathered their gear and set off from camp to get resupplied with ammunition they desperately needed. The shots erupted from Confederate muskets and cannons at around 5:30 in the morning toward Prentiss's lines, which immediately counterattacked, and the firefight soon turned into a killing ground south of an area of the battlefield called "The Peach Orchard," which saw some of the heaviest combat of the battle. At about 9:00 in the morning, the Ninth made its way behind Prentiss's lines, which had begun to retreat from the original positions they had held the night before. The Ninth encountered the men retreating, men who had been fighting for more than three hours, and saw "the horror and defeat in their eyes" (Cozzens, 38). Some men from the Ninth immediately called out to the uninjured stragglers who were scattered throughout the dismal-looking and heavily wounded veterans of that morning's combat, shouting encouragement to them to fight the Southern agitators, ultimately adopting fifty or so stragglers from the mob of men, who, in the hellfire and obliteration of that bloody Sunday afternoon, were "nearly all killed or wounded during the day" (Morrison, 29).

As a result of some of Prentiss's retreating or generally exhausted and shell-shocked forces, the Ninth Illinois was moved to guard his left flank. The Ninth had come to a place about a mile south of the hellish clash of men in a field called "Cloud Field." Captain James C. McClery of Company K turned to all of the men before heading out on their march toward the thunder of guns in the distance and rallied the soldiers' courage, yelling, "There is going to be plenty of fighting today; there must be no cowards" (Cozzens, 38). Soldiers of the Ninth immediately fell into rank and began marching the

mile to the point where they would make their stand against the Confederate lines of aggression, and ultimately the destruction of much of the regiment. As they began a swift stride toward the blood-soaked and body-riddled woods, the Ninth passed a pond on the battlefield that would famously inspire the grim nickname “the bloody pond” (Cozzens), an area north of the Peach Orchard that saw heavy combat during the battle. Soldiers would become injured and extremely thirsty during the gruesome clash, and would limp or crawl their way to the pond to get a drink of water. This happened hundreds of times over the course of the battle, and because so much blood had leaked into the pond from wounded soldiers, the water was dyed red as a result (Cozzens, 39)

Around 11:00 in the morning, Colonel Mersy and the Ninth turned off of the road they had been travelling from Cloud Field into the dense woods, which were littered with fallen trees and the grey- and blue-clad bodies of the dead and wounded. Progress through the opaque woods and the smoke-filled air was sluggish and dreadful. As men wrestled through the abundance of trees and brush, Companies B and C came under a heavy artillery bombardment, immediately causing their ranks to tremble under the pressure. Mersy and the leaders of the Ninth’s companies had difficulty finding their way through the zigzag of trees until Mersy spotted a softly sloped ravine and ordered his men to descend down into the gully. The Ninth responded immediately at the shout of Mersy’s orders to proceed forward and soon found themselves under a hail of rifle fire that ran like a scythe through their lines. They raced for the far side of the ravine, and as they reached the other side, they found themselves face to face with General John K. Jackson’s Confederates, who were also making haste to claim the battered soil of the ravine (Cozzens, 39). Colonel Mersy then

barked orders to fire at the close Confederates. The first row of men levelled their muskets and fired, creating a wall of dense fog between the Blue and the Grey.

Volleys of hellfire with Jackson's Confederates raged for thirty minutes more. The Ninth had a major advantage over their Grey counterparts, being in a ravine where they could duck down and take cover as they reloaded, while the Southern troops were stuck on flat terrain with no cover besides the trees and brush that dotted the landscape. Volley after volley from the Union troops, entrenched at the crest of the ravine, began to take a toll on the Confederates. The Rebels received the short end of the stick, and they began to withdraw farther back from where they had come and then began skirmishing from a longer range, but ineffectively at best. As heavy combat began to diminish, Confederate reinforcements from John C. Breckinridge's brigade began to infuse themselves with Confederate Regulars who were already engaged in combat. John S. Bowen's Confederates and Winfield S. Statham's Mississippians also increased the Confederate's lines, totalling to more than 8,000 men, facing off against fewer than 4,000 Union defenders (Cozzens, 40). Some 4,000 men from Illinois had been depleted in size from the intense combat of the previous hour. They were the only Union troops who held Grant's left flank, and the only men guarding his mustering point at Pittsburg Landing.

At high noon on that Sunday, the Confederate force that dwarfed the Union forces mounted a heavy assault toward the Union lines. Statham's Twentieth Tennessee Volunteers drove forward toward the Ninth Illinois, who were still bolstered by the cover of the ravine they were defending. Between the walls of troops stood 100 yards of ground over which the two regiments traded heavy volleys that cut men to pieces, creating heavy

casualties on both sides and slow progress for the advancing Confederates (Daniel, 223). Men of the Ninth "fired, darted into the ravine, reloaded, and scampered back up over the edge to fire again," so that they could be as effective as possible while taking fewer casualties than their Southern counterparts (Cozzens, 40). Even with superior cover to the Twentieth Tennessee, the Ninth was still under a severe artillery bombardment from Confederate twelve-pounder guns, on top of the hellfire that bounded out of the Confederate infantry, as if it erupted from hell itself. One soldier in the Ninth fell victim to the intense bombardment and "had three or four of his ribs blown out by an artillery projectile, which exposed his throbbing heart. He died within minutes" (Daniel, 222). This depiction of such horrific violence exemplifies the magnitude of sacrifice and bravery shown by Union soldiers that day.

It took an entire hour of focused firepower and will, but the Ninth beat back the soldiers of the Twentieth Tennessee; they were immediately replaced by Bowen's Ninth Arkansas Infantry, who filled the gap where the Twentieth were formerly positioned. This was now the third firefight with Confederate Regulars, and all were fresh units. One soldier from the Twentieth recalled that during the slaughter that was their skirmish with the Ninth, he had used half of all the rounds he was supplied with for the entire day of fighting (Cozzens, 40). Most of the men within the Ninth were in the same boat; they were running low on ammunition and were down to using the reserve ammo in their packs. Yet Colonel Mersy decided to stay in his fortified position within the ravine, as they could not retreat for fear of a Confederate breakthrough into the flanks of the rest of the line and Pittsburg Landing. At 1:00, the Ninth were now in the midst of a third firefight, outnumbered

heavily, low on ammunition, and suffering heavy losses. While the odds were stacked against them in every way, they stood their ground, for retreat was not an option in this situation. The stand the Ninth was taking against Johnston's men caught Johnston's eye, and he rode over to observe the conflict, commenting, "Those fellows are making a stubborn stand here. I'll have to put the bayonet on them" (Cozzens, 40).

Johnston proceeded to order his men to charge forward at the struggling defenders and hack them to pieces. All three Confederate units that had been making battle with the Ninth jolted forward across the blood-soaked landscape toward the Union lines. The two units positioned to the left flank of the Ninth were the Twelfth and Fiftieth Illinois. Confederates descended upon the Fiftieth first, jarring it to the point of retreat, at which time the Confederates shifted the great momentum of their charge toward the left flank of the Twelfth Illinois, which then collapsed as well (Cozzens, 41). These two almost simultaneous retreats left the Ninth Illinois helpless and in solitude, other units being ousted from their former line. This ousting left Jackson's Regulars behind them; Bowen and his Confederates began a swift assault on their left flank, where the ghost of the former battle line laid, and a full frontal attack from two former partners in death: the Twentieth Tennessee and the Ninth Arkansas Infantry units. Mersy ordered separate units to twist and turn to meet the vicious onslaught of raving Confederate troops. Hand-to-hand combat ensued for fifteen minutes, with the Ninth Illinois taking its heaviest losses of the entire battle. Mersy then gave the order of retreat after fifteen minutes of slaughter, but he left behind the companies of I and K, who had not heard the order and continued fighting; they took extremely heavy casualties.

As the Ninth retreated, the First Missouri Infantry raced after them and came within ten yards of the men trying to escape; Oates, the leader of Company K, recalled, “Their colors stopped so near us that I could count the stars” (Cozzens, 40). Retreating and vulnerable, the Ninth, specifically Companies I and K who had not heard the order for retreat, then absorbed a volley from the First Missouri. Confused Union soldiers scattered the ravine that they had defended for so long and ran away from the bloodthirsty Confederates. Oates then recalled as he turned around and saw his ragged company retreating from the massacre, “Dead and wounded lay so thick… a man could have walked from the head of our line to the foot on their bodies. (Cozzens, 41). This series of events left almost no able-bodied men remaining in I and K Companies.

As I and K Companies were barbarically ripped to shreds, other Confederate units fired upon the rest of the retreating companies, which had fallen back through the ravine and were caught like fish in a barrel trying to escape. Confederate riflemen fired fiery-hot lead into the backs of the retreating soldiers, who were then cut to pieces. All who remained sprinted back to the row of trees they had entered from the road just two hours prior, but this time something was drastically different. Mersy mustered his men who came straggling back from the newly formed graveyard that was the ravine they had called home throughout the battle. These men quickly formed ranks and returned fire into the trees. They then ran into Wicker Field and assembled as a unit; only 300 men assembled in the field. Earlier in the day they had entered the woods with 600 men, and only after a couple of hours, half that number staggered back out (Cozzens, 42). They were then ordered back

to camp to gather ammunition and clean their rifles, told they could expect even more combat again later in the day.

An hour later, there was still more fighting to be done to hold back the Confederate horde. The Ninth Illinois was asked to support Sherman's struggling ranks near the ravine where they had formerly been fighting. Mersy committed what was left of his forces to helping hold the Confederate forces at bay, so that Sherman's struggling forces would not fold to the onslaught. They withdrew from all combat one hour later and returned to camp for the night; they would not fight in the Battle of Shiloh the next day when the Union took the battle to the Confederates and pushed them out of the area. The next day they were left in reserve because of the massive number of casualties the Ninth had suffered in such a short time on the first day (Cozzens, 42).

When the Ninth Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment awoke on the Sunday, April 6, 1862, they had 600 men ready to fight the enemy; at sundown on that same day they stumbled back into their camp with 234 men, a loss of 366 men, or 61%. Two days later they walked back into the ravine to find the wounded, but a fire had sparked during the night in the ravine, and anyone who was too wounded to walk or crawl away had perished in the flames. The commanding officers of the Ninth who were left hadn't realized until the day after that bloody Sunday just how many they had lost. As Mersy called for a square formation during drill and examined the remaining men, a horrible realization dawned. He then yelled, "My poor boys--all gone. My poor little Ninth" (Cozzens, 43). One officer and 60 men were killed, 19 officers and 281 men were wounded, and one officer and four men

were missing in action. At the time, the Ninth had not realized that the price they paid on that dreadful day may have saved the entire Union army.

The Ninth, Fiftieth, and Twelfth Illinois Infantry Regiments were all placed on the left flank of the Union army, being the only soldiers between the 8,000 Confederates and Grant's supply post and temporary port at Pittsburg Landing, where he would bring in many more troops on April 7, and eventually rout the Confederates with superior numbers. As the Fiftieth and Twelfth Regiments circulated back into the woods in fear from the Confederate forces who came barreling forward in a bayonet charge, the Ninth Illinois were the only regiment left to defend the path to Pittsburg Landing, the area used to bring in extra troops which would bolster Union ranks and lead to a victory at Shiloh. If the Ninth had chosen the route its fellow regiments from Illinois had, the Confederate forces would surely have broken through and had a chance to capture Pittsburg Landing, and use a flanking maneuver on the middle-left flank of the Union army, ensnaring them in destruction. The Ninth's heroic sacrifice, dealt in blood and human lives, saved the Union from utter disaster at Shiloh, and saved the Army of Tennessee's ability to wage war.

A critical price was paid by the Ninth Illinois, a regiment made up of mostly German immigrants who had not even been born in the United States but gave their lives willingly and bravely in the face of grim odds to defend the land they called home. In the end, the Ninth had one of the war's highest single-day casualty rates of any regiment of troops, North or South. Without one of the greatest shows of military strength, commitment, and discipline which the Ninth exhibited on that bloody Sunday, the Union would have suffered a great loss in the Civil War's western theater that fateful day.

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